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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000296

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: INSIDE THE REEDUCATION PROGRAM

Classified By: AMBASSADOR RALPH L. BOYCE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

1. (C) Summary. In their struggle to manage the violence in Southern Thailand, Thai officials have turned to an Orwellian-sounding program of publicly blacklisting suspected separatists and forcing them to undergo "reeducation" or "training." The details of the program are much less foreboding than the labels involved, but the results may be counter-productive. While the RTG search for a less hard-line strategy in the South is to be commended, the poor design and execution of this program could result in increased support for anti-government violence. End Summary.

2. (C) Following domestic and international backlash over heavy-handed Thai security forces' actions in the South, such as the Tak Bai incident, RTG officials have struggled to make demonstrable progress in reducing the level of violence in the South while still respecting the rights of its citizens there. Given Prime Minister Thaksin's particular emphasis on new, big programs that deliver quick results, Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Minister Chidchai Vanasatidya unveiled in December 2005 a new program designed to quell the conflict by publicly identifying suspects (thus "shaming" them and sending the message that the government knows who they are) and sending them to "reeducation" camps.

MAKING A LIST AND CHECKING IT THRICE

3. (C) According to the Acting Narathiwat Provincial Defense Chief, the Southern Border Provinces Peace Building Command (SBPPBC) administers the program with help from the Ministries of Interior (MOI) and Justice (MOJ). People suspected of involvement in the violence are divided into four groups:
--people with arrest warrants--who are prosecuted "without compromise"
--core members of the violence
--people who commit the "disturbances"
--people closely associated with and supportive of the previous groups.

4. (C) The District Chief (an MOI official), the local military commander and the local police chief for a given locale meet regularly to discuss the names of the latter three categories. Each representative brings their own list of names for inclusion. All three must agree on the name for it to be placed on the list. If any one of the three officials disagrees, the name is not included in the list. The latter three categories of people are then summoned to district/police office under the July 2005 Emergency Decree. Those who fail to report may be issued arrest warrants (presumably putting them into category one).

5. (C) From there, the suspects are interrogated before being sent off to "school." People in categories two and three are placed in the 30-day military "peace-building" school. (Note, there are at least 11 of these "schools" spread throughout the country. End Note) Members of group four attend the MOI-MOJ 7-day course in Yala. After "graduating" they return to their village (with the new title "co-peace builders"). According to the District Chief, Narathiwat's list has about 600 people on it.

6. (C) Col. Thanet from the Civilian Affairs Division, SBPPBC, confirmed these details adding that the thirty day session includes up to 5 days of interrogation. The Emergency Decree allows authorities to hold suspects for "only" 30 days anyway. Education sessions in the program include "Rights and Liberties of the Thai People," "the Muslim Way for Peace," "Social Relationship Building," "Life and Experience Building," "Socialization," "Personality Building and Exercise" and "Sight Seeing."

7. (C) According to Thanet, attendees are able to pray freely each day. Instructors are both military and civilian personnel. The main school for people in the 30-day program is in an Army camp at Lopburi (home to several installations including the Special Forces). Since the Emergency Decree was announced in July, authorities have only "educated" 95 people from groups two and three, and 12-15 people from group four, but the program is being expanded.

ARE THEY INSANE?

18. (C) Critics of the program, however, see it as a step in the wrong direction. Kitcha Ali-Ishak and Withaya Buranasil, Chair and Deputy Chair of the Muslim Lawyers group strongly criticized this program in a January 11 meeting. Both seemed very skeptical of the process that produces the lists and the cultural and historical implications of government lists. Noted Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelapaijit who "disappeared" in 2004 was a friend of Kitcha, who noted that Somchai's name was the first on a less-public "blacklist" compiled by the government. Southern Muslims, already familiar with rumors of government "hitlists" and "blacklists" are unlikely to look on a new, public government "list" as benign.

19. (C) Moreover, both Kitcha and Withaya worry about the impact of "listing" large numbers of innocent people. Those people listed in error immediately fall under broader suspicion within their village. For those who have to attend the "training," taking 7-30 days off from work may leave their family without a bread-winner or lead them to lose their jobs. Those who refuse to undertake the "training" face arrest and might flee into the jungle or neighboring villages, aggravating the situation vis-a-vis the authorities. In the worst case, the RTG will have taken a person who is neutral in the conflict and turned them against the government. In Kitcha's opinion, RTG officials are severely misguided. Chidchai publicly suggested that people in the South who are not listed will be sad to miss out on such an "opportunity."

COMMENT

10. (C) Our Muslim lawyer contacts have good reason to be concerned about the impact of the "listing." It is not a huge leap from publicly listing suspected insurgents to direct extra-judicial methods. People here remember that Thaksin's 2003 "War on Drugs" started with lists of suspected dealers and ended up with over 1,500 unexplained deaths. At the same time, we note that the complaints against the lists from Muslim groups and human rights organizations center on real but less lethal complaints--lack of due process, the loss of income during the "training," and the stigma of public identification as a terrorist sympathizer. Also, we have not (yet) heard any complaints about mistreatment while in the camps. Nonetheless, the widespread criticisms are on the mark--the process undoubtedly catches up completely innocent people and forces them to surrender to government custody for up to a month without due process.

11. (C) Besides the human rights concerns that this program raises, we have serious doubts about its efficacy. Local security forces have struggled to put a face to the insurgency and arrest and prosecute its leaders, due in large part to poor police work and a lack of intelligence. That this same system can now identify local suspects outside of the traditional justice system seems a far stretch. The "reeducation" content seems strikingly poor to us as well. Rather than learning about the "Rights of the Thai People," the ethnically Malay Muslims of the Thai South are likely to come away with confirmation that they are indeed second-class citizens denied the rights of their ethnic-Thai countrymen. It is this feeling itself which has been at the root of the violence in the South for decades already.

BOYCE